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Alleged Iran-contra players no strangers to spy affairs

By Robert Timberg
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WASHINGTON — Many of the alleged players in the Iran-contra affair have deep roots in the nation's intelligence community and have worked together over the years on various cloak-and-dagger operations in Vietnam and Laos during the United States' involvement in Southeast Asia.

Some of the names that have surfaced as potentially important figures in the controversy seem to have been especially involved in the secret war waged by the Central Intelligence Agency in Laos, which took place at essentially the same time as the Vietnam conflict.

Those who were in Laos or have studied the American effort there say it was an ideal training ground for men who might later participate in the sort of clandestine activities that have characterized the Iran arms sales and the alleged diversion of funds to support the contras.

In particular, they point to the logistical expertise that many men developed there, as well as the skills needed to mobilize and train guerrilla units, set up dummy companies, handle secret bank accounts and, perhaps most importantly, cover their tracks.

Those who saw action in Southeast Asia and whose names have cropped up in the current controversy include:

Richard V. Secord: A highly decorated retired Air Force major general and West Point graduate, Mr. Secord is said by a variety of sources to have played Mr. Secord's role in the Iran-contra affair.

Mr. Secord, sources say, used his old military and intelligence contacts to set up the supply line that provided logistical support and possibly weapons to the contras after Congress, by the 1984 version of the Boland Amendment, forbade the government from doing so.

According to his official Air Force biography, Mr. Secord went to Southeast Asia in March 1962 as an adviser to the South Vietnamese. During this period, the biography says, he flew Vietnamese Air Force AT-28s and logged more than 200 combat missions.

Officially at least, the United States at that time was in an advisory role in Vietnam. Direct American

intervention in the Vietnam War began in 1965.

From August 1966 to August 1968, Mr. Secord was an "air adviser" stationed at Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base, his biography says. Not mentioned, however, is the fact that Thailand was the staging area for the secret war in neighboring Laos, in which numerous sources said Mr. Secord was deeply involved. Thailand, for that matter, was supposedly neutral in the Laotian conflict.

William M. Leary, a University of Georgia history professor who is working on the second book in his two-volume history of CIA air activities in the Far East, said Mr. Secord probably was flying forward air control missions, that is, spotting enemy targets and calling in air attacks on them.

An intelligence source said, "There is no doubt at one time he was connected with the war in Laos."

Mr. Secord also shows up in Laos in the early 1970s, although his biography makes no direct mention of it. Instead, it says that in June 1972 he was assigned duties at the Pentagon that included desk officer for Laos, Thailand and Vietnam.

In July 1973, moreover, he became executive assistant to the director of the Pentagon's Defense Security Assistance Agency, which handles military aid to foreign nations.

Military historian Shelby L. Stanton, a retired Army Green Beret officer who served in Laos, said that he knows from a variety of sources and documents that Mr. Secord was working on the Laotian war out of Udorn air base during 1972 and 1973.

Mr. Stanton, author of "Vietnam Order of Battle" and "Green Berets at War," recalls personally dealing with him on one occasion during his tour with the Green Berets in 1972-1973, when he said Mr. Secord was detached from the Air Force to the CIA.

At that time, Mr. Stanton said, Mr. Secord was a planning officer for the Thai Special Guerrilla Units, essentially large units of Thai mercenaries that the CIA was running into Laos against the communist Pathet Lao.

"He was at the funding end of the Thai SGU program," Mr. Stanton said. "He was one of the guys in charge of the money . . . of getting the money for the mercenary troops involved in the illegal war."

Attempts to reach Mr. Secord through his Washington attorney, Thomas C. Green, were unsuccessful.

John K. Singlaub: Mr. Singlaub was the commander of U.S. troops in South Korea in 1977 when he publicly disagreed with then-President Jimmy Carter's plan to cut American troop strength there.

Fired from his Korean post by the president, Mr. Singlaub retired in 1978 as a major general and not long after became involved with the conservative New Right network that was beginning to flourish under such men as the direct-mail fundraiser Richard Viguerie and Howard R. Phillips of the Conservative Caucus.

Until September, Mr. Singlaub was chairman of the World Anti-Communist League, and remains on the organization's board. But the organization he devotes most of his time to is the United States Council for World Freedom, the WACF's American affiliate, which operates out of Phoenix, Ariz.

With the passage of the 1984 version of the Boland Amendment, which cut off military aid to the contras, Mr. Singlaub was reportedly recruited by the NSC's Colonel North to assist in raising funds to help continue aid to the contras while the congressional cutoff was in effect.

Mr. Singlaub has deep roots in the nation's intelligence establishment going back to the World War II Office of Strategic Services, forerunner of the CIA.

During the war, Mr. Singlaub helped organize French Resistance forces and worked closely with a more senior OSS officer, William J. Casey, currently the Director of Central Intelligence, said Joyce Downey, Mr. Singlaub's assistant.

Mr. Singlaub was also deeply involved in intelligence work during the Korean and Vietnam wars. In Vietnam from 1966 to 1968, Mr. Singlaub headed the super-secret MACV-SOG, or Military Assistance Command, Vietnam-Studies and Observation Group.

Mr. Stanton said MACV-SOG was involved in highly classified missions aimed at interdicting the movement of North Vietnamese men and supplies into South Vietnam.

"There were a lot of strange things that they did and a lot of strange people who worked for them," he said. "This is a unit that is not going to mess around with a lot

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of people. They did a lot of things, and they didn't answer a lot of questions about it."

Mr. Stanton said Mr. Singlaub's unit might have conducted some operations in Laos, not as part of the secret war, but rather against that portion of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the main Viet Cong supply line, that ran through Laotian territory.

Mr. Singlaub's deputy at MACV-SOB was Harry C. (Heine) Aderholt, now a retired Air Force brigadier general, who was named by *The New York Times* as part of the network that ran the contra supply operation. He has denied the allegation.

On Mr. Singlaub's relationship with President Reagan, Ms. Downey said he hasn't spoken to him for two months, but added, "He's had a fair bit of access to the president in the past." Asked what the two men talk about, she said, "The conversations are generally about the communist movement all over the world."

Harry C. (Heine) Aderholt: Although he has adamantly denied it, Mr. Aderholt, a retired Air Force brigadier general living on the Florida panhandle, has been named by *The New York Times* as part of the largely clandestine United States-based supply operation for the Nicaraguan contras.

Mr. Aderholt heads the Air Commando Association, based in the town of Fort Walton Beach on the Florida panhandle and comprising veterans of the Air Force's elite covert operations force, similar to the Army's Green Berets.

As an Air Force officer, Mr. Aderholt was legendary in Southeast Asia, both in Laos and Vietnam.

According to Professor Leary, Mr. Aderholt was involved in carving out numerous landing strips that he said were used extensively by the CIA-owned Air America airline to support its covert operations in Laos.

From 1966 to 1968 Mr. Aderholt served as Mr. Singlaub's deputy in Vietnam at MACV-SOG, the clandestine unit that ran secret raids in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

Military historian Stanton said that Mr. Aderholt, in the early 1970s, ran the "special operations wing" stationed at the huge air base at Nakon Phanom on the Mekong River along the Thai-Laotian border.

That unit, Mr. Stanton said, was involved in "an array of top-secret missions in Laos," including bombing, strafing, leafletting and air rescue.

In 1974, Professor Leary said, Mr. Aderholt set up the airlift to resupply the besieged Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh, using C-130 cargo planes flying under the corporate

name of Bird Air.

The assistant chief pilot for Bird Air, Mr. Leary said, was Wallace B. Sawyer Jr., one of the three men killed Oct. 5 when the C-123K cargo plane carrying Eugene Hasenfus went down in Nicaragua.

Mr. Aderholt is in Europe and could not be reached for comment, but a spokesman for the Air Commando Association, Dick Zappe, repeated the retired general's denial that the organization had been involved in any way with the contras.

But the spokesman confirmed that Mr. Aderholt knew many of the people whose names have surfaced in the Iran-contra matter. "He knows all of these people," he said.

Mr. Zappe said that Mr. Aderholt had worked for Mr. Singlaub in Southeast Asia and remained "good friends" with him. In addition, he said, the general worked with Mr. Secord on and off for 15 years, and considered him "his protege."

Mr. Zappe also said that William J. Cooper, the pilot who was killed when his plane was shot down Oct. 5 in Nicaragua, was a member of the Air Commando Association although his flights on behalf of the contras had nothing to do with the organization.

The association's current newsletter, Mr. Zappe said, carries an "in memoriam" for Mr. Cooper, calling him "not a soldier of fortune," but rather "a true humanitarian."

Theodore G. Shackley: Mr. Shackley, a retired senior CIA officer who Professor Leary and others said for a time ran the secret war in Laos, surfaced in a *New York Times* story that said he had participated in a series of meetings in late 1984 in which a key Iranian middleman in the current affair approached ex-American intelligence officials with an offer to trade hostages for money.

According to the *Times*, Manucher Ghorbanifar, an Iranian arms merchant, and several Iranian clerics on arms-purchasing missions, met with the old intelligence officials in a Hamburg, West Germany, hotel room and laid out the offer.

Sources told the *Times* that Mr. Shackley wrote up a detailed report, including telephone numbers in Europe for Mr. Ghorbanifar, and passed it on to the administration, but sources disagreed on whether it went to a Cabinet officer or a member of the National Security Council staff.

If Mr. Shackley played a further role in the Iran-contra affair, it has not taken public shape yet, although he is an associate of Mr. Secord and others whose names have cropped up in the current controversy.

There is little doubt of Mr. Shack-

ley's ties to Laos, where he served as CIA station chief during the middle to late 1960s and effectively commanded a private army comprising Meo tribesmen and their American military advisers: CIA operatives; an air force made up in part of Air America and other CIA-affiliated airlines as well as American military aircraft manned by U.S. military pilots; and other American military personnel that included elite Green Berets.

Without spelling it out, Mr. Shackley, who achieved the rank of deputy director for operations, making him the No. 2 man in the nation's clandestine services, reinforces his Laotian ties in the dedication of his 1981 book, "The Third Option: An American View of Counterinsurgency Operations."

"This book is dedicated to the heroic Meo hill tribes of North Laos," he wrote. "I hope it will bring some small recognition to a nomadic, freedom-loving people who fought the full military power of North Vietnam to a standstill."

Peter Maas, in a 1986 book, "Manhunt," about the ex-CIA operative and convicted arms smuggler Edwin Wilson, notes that Mr. Secord "operated closely" in Laos with Mr. Shackley and a key subordinate there, Thomas G. Clines, whose name has also come up in the Iran-contra matter.

After Laos, Mr. Shackley moved to Saigon as the CIA chief of station there. In 1972, Mr. Maas writes, he returned to the agency's headquarters in Langley, Va., as head of the Latin American division. He could not be reached for comment.

Thomas G. Clines: Ex-CIA operative Clines, whose association with Mr. Secord apparently began during the Laos days and has continued right up to the present, reportedly handled the hiring of pilots for air supply missions to the contras.

Mr. Clines worked under Mr. Shackley in a number of locales, including Laos and Vietnam. Before Laos, Mr. Shackley and Mr. Clines worked together in Miami in the aftermath of the aborted Bay of Pigs invasion, reportedly dispatching expatriate Cubans into Cuba on a variety of anti-Castro missions. He could not be reached for comment.

Donald P. Gregg: Mr. Gregg, Vice President George Bush's national security adviser, is a retired CIA officer who has acknowledged meeting with an old agency friend, Felix Rodriguez, about a dozen times since November 1983.

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After his capture. Mr. Hasenfus said that Mr. Rodriguez, whom he knew as Max Gomez, was one of two men who ran the contra resupply operation from the Ilopango air base in El Salvador.

But according to a statement released last week by the vice president's office, Mr. Rodriguez never raised the subject of supplying the contras with Mr. Bush, who met with him three times, or any of the Bush staff until last Aug. 8.

Mr. Gregg, who retired from the CIA in August 1982 after 31 years, 18 in Asia, met Mr. Rodriguez, a CIA operative, in Vietnam in 1970, according to the Bush statement. This is about the time Mr. Shackley was Saigon station chief.

"Working together with other CIA officials, they developed an effective operational concept for use against guerrilla units operating in the provinces near Saigon," the statement said.

Mr. Rodriguez retired from the CIA on a disability resulting from a back injury sustained in a helicopter crash in Vietnam, but he and Mr. Gregg "maintained sporadic contact" in the intervening years, the statement said.

Mr. Gregg declined comment. Mr. Bush, who served as director of central intelligence under President Gerald R. Ford, has called Mr. Rodriguez a patriot, but has denied that he or his staff were in any way involved in directing, coordinating or approving military aid to the contras and any knowledge of the diversions of funds from Iranian arms sales to support the insurgents.

James H. Bastian: Mr. Bastian, an attorney, is chairman of Southern Air Transport, the one-time CIA airline that the FBI is investigating for potential links to the contra resupply operation.

Mr. Bastian worked in the 1960s for **George A. Doole Jr.**, the CIA officer responsible for all agency-owned

airlines in the Far East, Mr. Leary said. Those airlines were held under a front organization called the Pacific Corporation. During this period, Mr. Bastian served as vice president and secretary of the organization, Mr. Leary said.

Efforts to reach Mr. Bastian were unsuccessful.

Eugene L. Hasenfus: Mr. Hasenfus, 45, of Marinette, Wis., was the only survivor of the C-123K cargo plane shot down Oct. 5 over Nicaragua. After his capture by Sandinista forces, he told reporters in Managua that he was "a worker" for the CIA.

A parachute rigger in the Marine Corps, Mr. Hasenfus later went to work for Air America, the CIA-owned airline that operated out of Vientiane, Laos, as an air freight specialist, or "kicker," Mr. Leary said.

He was serving in that capacity when his plane was shot down. Tried by a Nicaraguan court, he was sentenced to 30 years for aiding the contras. He was released last week by Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega.

William J. Cooper: A 62-year-old avy veteran from Reno, Nev., Mr. Cooper was killed when the cargo plane he was piloting was shot down over Nicaragua Oct. 5 by the Sandinistas.

Professor Leary said Mr. Cooper worked for Air America, the CIA airline, from 1965 until shortly before it was sold off in the mid-1970s, much of the time as assistant chief pilot for C-123s, forerunner of the C-123K in which he was killed.

"He was one of their most senior, most experienced air drop specialists," Mr. Leary said, adding that Mr. Cooper was stationed in the Laotian capital of Vientiane for the entire period of his Air America service.

Of Mr. Cooper's involvement in the contra supply operation, Mr. Leary, who interviewed him for his book two years ago, said, "He had

turned 60, he was out of a job. You can't get many jobs as a pilot after you reach 60, and he needed money."

But, Mr. Leary continued, "The Sandinistas couldn't have paid him enough to work for them. He was, in his way, a quiet patriot. He wasn't the kind of guy to go to soldier-of-fortune conventions wearing a 'Kill Commies' T-shirt."

Wallace Blaine Sawyer Jr.: Mr. Sawyer, 41, of Magnolia, Ark., was also killed in the downing of the C-123K.

A 1968 graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy, Mr. Sawyer spent six years in the service piloting cargo planes. Professor Leary said that after Mr. Sawyer left the Air Force in 1974, he went to work for Bird Air, an airline that had handled numerous CIA contracts in Laos but denied being a so-called CIA proprietary like Air America.

With Bird Air as an assistant chief pilot, Mr. Leary said, Mr. Sawyer was part of the airlift into embattled Phnom Penh run by retired Air Force General Aderholt.

Until about a year ago, Mr. Sawyer was employed by Southern Air Transport, according to published reports.

Sun researcher Robert Fahs contributed to this article.

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